

Harrison Building

4 South Fifteenth Street (southwest  
corner of Fifteenth and Market Streets)

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1088

HABS

PA

SI-PHILA

268-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-1088

## HARRISON BUILDING

HABS  
PA  
51-PHILA  
268-

Address: 4 South Fifteenth Street (southwest corner of Fifteenth and Market Streets), Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: General Electric Pension Trust.

Present Use: Vacant except for ground-floor stores.

Statement of Significance: The exterior of the Harrison Building is an adaptation of the eclectic Francois I style of decoration by Cope and Stewardson, architects, to a high-rise commercial structure of regularized floor plan.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

Grantor		Grantee
7/1/1893	Ellen L. Devine widow & exect. of will of Mark Devine , dec'd SW corner 15th & Market, 40' on Market 115' on 15th street to 8' alley	Alfred G. Harrison
5/7/1943	Penna. Co. Sur. Trustee for Mary de F Geary under will Alfred C. Harrison; B. B. Jennings, Kate Prentice under will Caroline Prentice Cromwell.	Eugene Hookey
5/20/1943	Eugene Hookey	James F. Hickey
1/10/62	James F. Hickey	E. G. Kinloch, J. D. Lockton, J. S. Parker, A. F. Vinson, Robert Pfenning, and Virgil B. Day, Trustees of General Electric Pension Trust.

## 2. Date of erection: 1893-95

## 3. Architect, suppliers: Walter Cope and John Stewardson, architects; Merritt &amp; Company, Incorporated, Engineers and Contractors supplied expanded metal lath.

4. Original plans and alterations: Same as present structure (see Architectural Information Part II) except for ground story which originally had a one-story stone entry porch on the Market Street facade. Stores added later in first story.
5. Important old views: Photograph of exterior taken from northeast (c. 1900) Penrose Collection, Box 20, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

OFFICE BUILDING DIRECTORY

p. 109

"Harrison Building

"This building is owned by Mr. Alfred C. Harrison, and is most conveniently situated at 15th and Market Sts., near the railroad stations and law courts. It is a fireproof building of steel frame construction, the walls being composed entirely of terra cotta. The steep roof is of green slate.

"There are twelve office floors, the first being divided for banking purposes. The upper floors are each divided into nineteen offices.

"The building is heated by steam and lighted by electricity, generated by two dynamos in the basement.

"There are three high-speed elevators, and an elaborate system of plumbing. All offices are provided with wash basins, with hot and cold water.

"All details of interior finish are very complete and elaborate and of the most approved modern construction.

"There is a telegraph office and long distance telephone on first floor.

"For further information, apply to J. M. Gummey & Sons, 733 Walnut St."

C. Sources of Information

American Architect and Building News. Vol. XLVII, No. 999, February 16, 1895. Four plates include: side elevations and sections of stack; detail of 15th Street entrance; front elevation of stack and large dormer, and window details.

Catalogue of the T. Square Club Architectural Exhibition... 1896-97. Philadelphia: T Square Club, 1897. Advertisement pp. 18-19.

Directory of the Principal Office Buildings in Philadelphia. Philadelphia: W. A. H. Waldeck, 1896. pp. 108-10, including full page photograph.

The Evening Bulletin (Philadelphia). June 8, 1961; May 11, 1962.

Stewardson, William Emlyn. "Cope and Stewardson, The Architects of a Philadelphia Renaissance." unpublished B. A. Thesis, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, May 2, 1960.

Tatum, George B. Penn's Great Town. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961.

White, Theo. B. (ed.). Philadelphia Architecture in the Nineteenth Century. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1953. Plate 84 (exterior view from northwest).

Prepared by William B. Bassett, Architectural  
Historian  
National Park Service  
September 1964

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Exterior: The Harrison Building is rectangular in plan. The long axis runs north and south; the long side faces to the east on Fifteenth Street. The thirteen-floor building has a steel frame with terra-cotta cladding and ornamentation. The roof is slate covered, high pitched and hipped. The rich detailing is most noticeable at the first, second, and attic levels. Although essentially flat, the Fifteenth Street facade, by means of a few inches articulation, achieves the effect of two end pavilions and a center block. The skyline is the most ornamental feature of the building, because the steep roof is accentuated by ornamental dormers and chimneys. The drain pipes are prominent at the roof level and are used in a "designerly" fashion. Flanking the pair of chimneys at the horizontal roof ridge are two very large and ornamental lightning rods, which crown the points at which the four planes of the roof meet.

The character of the first floor of the Harrison Building is essentially lost due to the remodeled shop fronts. The center of the Fifteenth Street facade, at the main entrance, is the only original portion. The main entry is rather small in a building of this size, but it is attractive and well ornamented by carving. The pair of entry doors under an elliptical-arch glazed transom are wooden, with glass in the upper panels and diamond-over-square panels in the lower portions (picking up a theme used in the stone plinths at the side of the decorative archway). The entry archway is ornamental, carved stone with many decorative features including putti, scrolls, shells, etc. that reveals the building's derivation from the early French Renaissance and Italian mannerism. Above the door, on the second floor a similar theme is used in a slightly simplified manner. This is the only significant feature in the center of the building, on the Fifteenth Street side, except for small balconies at the fourth and fifth floor levels. These balconies are matched by one at the Market Street end of the building at the fifth floor level.

The second floor of the building retains its original character and is perhaps the most ornamental story of the building. A good deal of the ornamental stonework occurs here. Between the first and second floors is a carved stone plinth course over which are flat-arched windows, flanked by carved stone pilasters (done in very low relief). Between the second and third floors occurs another wide decorated course which breaks into a continuous bracketed cornice line. Above this cornice line to the roof line, the ashlar walls are essentially flat. The windows are rectangular, with very simple frames and no face decoration. The windows have one-over-one light, double-hung wooden sash. On the eighth floor only, this pattern is interrupted by a line of coupled (in general) round-headed windows. Above these round-headed windows is another story of rectangular windows (over another decorative plinth course), and above this occurs the main cornice line of the building. This cornice is in the form of an exaggerated, bracketed, continuous stone balcony running around the building. Above this cornice-balcony are two more office floors. These are more "playful" than the office floors below, and have much more ornamental trim. The upper of these two floors is the eleventh, whose windows "break" into dormers. Above the eleventh floor there are more levels of attic dormers. Some of the dormers break into elaborate frontispieces in some places, and others have simple hipped roofs--(some with smaller versions of the lightning rods used on the main roof). The Market Street facade matches the Fifteenth Street side, but is much narrower and has only one balcony at the fifth floor level. The west elevation of the building consists of two end pavilions, articulating the surface plane of the building about eight feet, with a flat central element with a large applied chimney running from the ground up to the top of the roof. This chimney is essentially flat up to the line of the twelfth window level, where it breaks into pilastered and ornamental areas. The very top of the chimney has a row of freestanding, ornamental fleur-de-lis. The other features of the west elevation are the same as those on the other facades, save for the de-emphasis of the cornice-balcony at the roof. The south elevation is the same as the north.

The carved stone on the plinth course between the first and second floors consists primarily of panels between short pilasters. These panels are sculptured with flowers, vegetables, fruit and birds. The main subject in each case is three puti with the center puti performing some type of office job: one is typing, one is talking into a dictaphone, one is writing at a desk, etc. Many of these are covered by the signs of the first floor shops. Above these, on the course between the second and third floors, occur similar panels. At the jambs of the second floor windows occur ornamental columns made up of tiers of vases, pots and various classical elements, and puti. On the front surface of the building, at this level are flat pilasters with rather ornamental capitals and playful

Wedgewood-like designs flanking the windows. Incorporated throughout this structure and throughout these ornamental carvings is the letter "H" evidently referring to Harrison. Flanking the main entrance door on Fifteenth Street are two deep niches which are combined with a pair of pilasters ending at the second floor level. Directly above them on the second floor are two smaller, similar niches. These niches look, now, as though they may have contained lighting fixtures at one time, but there is no clue at present as to their original function. The ceilings of the first floor niches are made of large shells. The roofs of the niches are in the forms of round colonnaded temples of tempiettas, one on top of the other. This theme is again used on the second floor.

The general effect of the building, as it is seen from the exterior, is one of geometric strength, being basically a rectangular solid surmounted by an elongated pyramid. The whole is given applied ornament at the base and the top, with the major area between relatively simple and flat.

Although the Harrison Building is superficially a Francois I chateau with many Renaissance-mannerist decorative details, its architectural unity and interest come from the fact that it basically attempts to find a practical solution for a multi-story office building design in an ever-more congested urban area.

- B. Interior: The first floor of the Harrison Building consists of a center lobby from Fifteenth Street, and shops which open onto the street and are not directly accessible from the lobby. The second floor and the upper office floors all have longitudinal corridors running north and south down the center of the building. On either side of the corridors are the offices. The very top levels of the buildings, under the high gable roof, contain the mechanical equipment for the gravity water system and the elevators.

The finish of the shops is modern, but the lobby finish on the first floor seems original. The floor of the lobby is of rectangular brownish marble. The walls and ceilings are of plaster. There is a four foot high wainscoting of marble which is primarily beige and ochre with dark veining. The trim is black. The foyer, between the street and the lobby, has marble trim similar to the lobby. The ceiling of the foyer has an artificial groin vault. The ceiling in the lobby has decorative, plaster cornice moldings. The doors entering the lobby all have natural-finish wood. Between the foyer and the lobby is one glass and wooden revolving door. To the south of the revolving door is a swinging door. There are double doors from the foyer to the street. Over the revolving and swinging doors is a large transom with a single sheet of semicircular glass.

The stairway is uniform from floor to floor. It is L-shaped going around two sides of the elevator. The treads and risers are white marble and there is marble wainscoting, matching

that which is used in the lobby. The stairways seem a bit narrow for a building of this size. The brass railing is tubular and about three inches in diameter. It bends gracefully around corners and into the walls at its terminal points. The fastenings holding the railings to the walls are of the same brass, and have a flamboyant vegetable design.

The three hydraulic elevators run from the lobby to the top of the building. The cars have ornamental wooden paneling with simple panels below and wood-framed grillwork panels above. The doors were originally of basket-weave type wire mesh on iron frames. These have now been sheathed in thin sheet aluminum. The floor level indicators are glass tubes about one inch in diameter and fourteen inches high, which show the level by colored liquid in the tubes. The elevators are similar to those later used across the street in the Arcade Building.

The office floors have central corridors which are finished to match the lobby, except for the floors which are cement over wood. This cement does not appear to be original. The offices have plaster walls and ceilings with wooden floors. Some of the floors have been covered with asphalt tile. There are chair rails and picture moldings in the offices, which are otherwise simple and utilitarian. The corridors have decorative cornice moldings. All woodwork on the upper floors matches that in the lobby, having a medium dark varnish finish. The doors on the upper floors have operating hopper transoms with one large glass panel. The doors themselves are heavy with one large glass panel above the rail, a letter slot in the rail and a square lower panel, with a square-over-square inset design. The interior window frames are simple and match the remaining woodwork.

Some of the original lighting exists in the upper corridors and the bathrooms. Those fixtures in the corridors hang down about four feet from the ceiling on chains with one bulb and a small white decorative glass shade. The heat is steam radiator, and there are a number of different sizes and shapes of radiators. Some of the offices have lavatories in them, with sinks with square marble tops, oval porcelain bowls, and slightly ornamented mixer faucets. The bathrooms in general still have the original water closets. These have ornamental bowls with low relief vegetable designs. The water tanks for each unit are located above the fixture and hung on the wall. The mechanism is then activated by the pulling of a chain. The seats are wooden as are the stall doors which are louvered and finished to match the remainder of the building's woodwork. The bathrooms have white 3" x 6" ceramic tile wainscot extending halfway up the wall.

The fire extinguishers are held up by ornamental cast metal fixtures as are the fire hoses. The building has a mail chute with glass panels extending through all floors--and brass fittings, some of them quite ornamental; the American Eagle and the Post

Office being the prime decorative motif.

The stairways and the basement are protected by later metal-covered fire doors. In the basement and the sub-basement some of the steel truss construction can be seen. Only part of the structure is concrete-covered for fireproofing. Also of interest is a series of air vents along the north wall of the sub-basement which opens into the subway under Market Street. Along the Fifteenth Street side, or the east side, of the sub-basement is a series of semicircular bays, making a row of niches along that wall. The foundations appear to be of concrete.

Prepared by Donald B. Meyer, Architect  
National Park Service  
December 1962